

Communion Meditation  
A-PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FAITH  
Acts 2:1-13  
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Holy S.  
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Whenever the subject of the Holy Spirit or the Trinity came up the late Cardinal Cushing used to tell a story about the idea of the Trinity which is one of my favorites. Walking down the street one day, the man immediately in front of the Cardinal, fell to the sidewalk, stricken with a heart attack. The good Cardinal fell to his knees beside the man and said - "My son, are you a Catholic? Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit?" The man, according to Cushing - opened one eye - and to the crowd which had gathered said, "Here I am dying and he's asking me riddles."

The trouble is that Christianity has more to say about God than it is easy to say simply. And sometimes, the more we talk, the more vague we become until everyone stops listening.

About God, we wish to say that...

1. He is Creator - of everything that exists, that He is timeless, that He is more than we can understand, that all of human history is played out within His attention and providence,
2. ..and we wish to say that He was present in a very particular way in the life of Jesus who lived nearly two thousand years ago: that He revealed himself in that life,
3. ..and we wish to say that He is also here - now - in our time, and our world - not in a particular life, but a presence. Leslie Newbegin uses the phrase "The Power at work among us..."

What we mean is that God is experienced on occasion, in healing, reconciling, joy, peace and love: that when these things happen in lives we know it is God at work among us. Historically all of that has been held together in the doctrine of the Trinity. But there are problems. In fact, the idea of the Trinity seems sometimes to create as many problems for twentieth century people as it apparently resolved for the early Christians. We do well, it seems, so long as faith can remain private. But when it becomes public, whenever we have to discuss it, document it, point to it, or in any way bring it out in the open we begin to fumble, and stumble, and mutter something about Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The late Episcopal Bishop James Pike thought the doctrine of the Trinity was no longer helpful and should be abandoned. Many would agree. I wish there were new ways to describe what we mean by God: ways which had some possibility of being heard and understood by people no longer comfortable with the idea of a spirit, let alone Holy Ghost.

And yet, the most influential theologian of our century, Karl Barth, said that "the critical theme for modern theology will be the doctrine of the Holy Spirit". God's relationship to His creation, Barth, suggested, would be critical. And why? The reason, I think, is that the modern world, very simply, no longer provides daily evidence that God is even around. In another age Robert Browning could write that "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world". And the inference is that you know God's in his heaven precisely because all is right with the world. But all is not right with our world. In fact, some would suggest that there is very little right. How do you believe in God after all, "after Auschwitz"? How do you believe in God's sovereignty or providence in the midst of an insane arms race, or a demonic international dilemma, or the injustice which caused Miami and results from it? How to

believe in God in a world that seems, frankly, God forsaken? That's why Barth said it was a critical matter. It always has been, but our world has made it even more difficult.

In addition, it is no easy thing to talk intelligently about intense personal experience. It is a different matter altogether to feel God's existence, His love and His will, in my heart, and to be able to tell you about it in a way that means anything at all to you. My love for my family may be a consuming passion to me. After a minute or so of describing it, however, you may find it rather boring. Only the poets and musicians are much good at putting intense feeling into a medium that communicates.

Well, one day, a long time ago something happened to a group of people that was so important it had to be communicated. It had to do with God and themselves and the relationship between them. It was intensely private - but also public. It had to be told and celebrated because the experience was critical. In fact the more they thought about that day the more convinced they were that they had played a small role in a major drama. In fact, they had been part of a miracle.

There they were, hiding in a room in Jerusalem fifty or so days after the crucifixion of their leader. It was Pentecost, and with nervous glances over their shoulders they ventured out into the streets and mingled with the crowd of religious pilgrims. And all of a sudden something happened. All of a sudden frightened Galileans became strong and courageous advocates of the Gospel. Suddenly people who had been cowering behind a locked door were willing to die for their convictions. Suddenly people who didn't seem to understand what was happening to them became articulate, persuasive, eloquent.

When they remembered the experience much later what seemed most miraculous to them was the energy and vitality and the faith - the ability to believe which before had eluded them but now was overwhelming, and the ability to communicate. And when they told this intense story to others they used symbol language, drawing on images their people understood to be loaded with power and divine content - wind and fire - and as at that Tower of Babel centuries before, when the inability to communicate had scattered them across the earth, so now the ability to speak and be understood was drawing them together.

It was the Holy Spirit, they said, and what they meant was a shorthand metaphor for God: God here, God giving life and courage and power, God so real that unbelief was out of the question. Reformed theologian James Smart wrote, in a classic on the subject, "The Holy Spirit is God. That needs to be said plainly and grasped firmly, because the failure to take it fully in earnest leads to many false conceptions..." (The Creed in Christian Teaching, p.183).

The Holy Spirit is "God here" someone has said. And the theological problem has always been that we seem to end up with three Gods. In fact, as soon as we talk about the Holy Spirit - with a personal pronoun "he", we can't seem to resist stage managing the experience itself and, for the life of me, some of my friends sound like they are embracing a divine troika - three deities, separate, different in essence, instead of a Trinity, which has always meant no more or no less than one God whom we perceive in three ways.

That's our problem, however, not the Bible's. The New Testament knows who the Holy Spirit is. It is God doing some very visible things - in the world, among His people. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." (II Corinthians 3:17).

St. Paul once said. And on another occasion, in the midst of a full-blown discussion of the subject he defined it clearly: "The fruit (or harvest) of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22).

That's the Holy Spirit in New Testament terms. Whenever you experience love, joy, peace - whenever you receive or express kindness, patience, goodness - whenever someone has been faithful in marriage, in religion, in life, in work - it's a gift of God: it's evidence that He is present and active. And when you believe; when into the ambiguity of your heart a glorious moment of certainty bursts, the Holy Spirit has been there - God here. God at work.

Sometimes it's dramatic. Sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's complex and confusing and full of ambiguity. I've always doubted that the Biblical miracles occurred with all the straight forward clarity which adorns them in the text. I'm willing to guess that not everyone saw the tongues of fire with the same detail. In any event God works with the ambiguous stuff of life to bring peace and joy and love...And I think of gentle Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor, theologian, near-pacifist - being pulled inexorably into the conflict with Nazism and helping, finally, to plan an assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler. And I want to say - "That's what the Holy Spirit is."

And I think of the World Council of Churches granting money to the guerillas in what was bloody Rhodesia, and those controversial American dollars paying the way for negotiators to sit down and talk in London - and the fact that for the moment it's working and people aren't killing each other in Zimbabwe. That's the Holy Spirit.

And I think of our brother Donald Fraser doggedly working in Belfast, Presbyterian Church of Ireland, and a communique I received just this week which indicated that incredibly, in one Belfast area, Catholics and Protestants are worshipping together. That's God here - Holy Spirit.

I think about the "dark night of the soul" and the fact that even there you and I are given the gift of faith.

Ganse Little, former pastor of this church wrote once that "One of the glories of human life is the demonstrated evidence of the presence of the (Holy Spirit) Comforter in the lives of imperfect, faltering, failing men and women who 'out of weakness' were made strong." (Beliefs that Matter, p.135).

The privilege of the ministry is to witness that - daily.

God, we dare to believe, is creator, source of all that is, giver of life. In that, our faith corresponds with many other religions. God, we dare to believe, became one of us, lived our life, died our death. In that, our faith differs radically. God, we dare to believe - the same God who created and who lived in the life of Jesus, still comes among us. He still gives life and hope and joy and peace. He uses the ordinary to do His will - your life, for instance, and mine. He lives in you and works in you and loves and saves the world through you. He takes the ordinary - bread and wine and makes of it a blessed sacrament, and joins us to one another - and to Him as we eat and drink together.

So let us come to table - in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.